

Oswald, the Soviets and U.S. Intelligence

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By MICHAEL LEDEEN

Although most people are convinced that innumerable secrets of our nation's life lie buried in the vaults of the government's archives, awaiting the expiration of 75-year restrictions before coming to light, few could have dreamed of the information Edward Jay Epstein has somehow uncovered and analyzed in one of the year's most important books.

The book's subtitle is somewhat misleading; for while "Legend" contains a

wealth of information about Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, its real subject is the deadly international struggle between the intelligence services of the United States and the Soviet Union. In a series of fascinating and provocative connections, Mr. Epstein leads us from Oswald's Marine years at a top-secret U-2 base in Japan; to the trial of Francis Gary Powers in Moscow, through an array of KGB, Cuban and European agents; to the assassination of Kennedy in Dallas. It is impossible to read these pages without believing that Oswald—at a minimum—had collaborated with the KGB during his years in the Soviet Union, and that he maintained contact with Russian intelligence for the rest of his life.

But the most remarkable part of Mr. Epstein's story—and the most important aspect of "Legend"—takes place after Oswald's death. For American counterintelligence experts then had to evaluate the possibility that the President had been murdered by an agent of a foreign country, and there was plenty of evidence to suggest that Oswald was a KGB agent. This was profoundly threatening to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who had somehow failed to place Oswald under surveillance, and who consequently dreaded the thought that he might be branded criminally negligent in the events of November 22, 1963. But the possibility that the Americans might decide that a Soviet agent had murdered Kennedy was also threatening to the Russians—regardless of the truth of the matter. So it was not inconceivable that events of catastrophic proportions might hinge on the answer to the question: Who was Lee Harvey Oswald?

At the very moment that American experts were trying to answer this question by piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of Oswald's life, a Soviet citizen named Yuri Nosenko defected to the CIA in Geneva and claimed to be the KGB official who had supervised the Oswald file in Russia. Nosenko had established a connection with the CIA two years earlier, had passed some useful information to the Agency, and now insisted that he was defecting because the Russians had discovered his treachery. Nosenko told the CIA that he might be killed if he were not permitted to defect. Under the circumstances, it was

impossible for the CIA to refuse Nosenko, and the Russian came to America, where he told his story: There had been no connection whatsoever, Nosenko said, between Oswald and Soviet intelligence. Many experts at the Agency doubted Nosenko's credibility, and eventually came to believe that he had been sent over as a "disinformation agent," who told the Americans what they wanted to hear, and thus protected Soviet interests. Mr. Epstein supports this theory, and his case is all the more convincing because he provides an excellent analysis of the history of similar operations by the Soviet Union. For the most part, secret information about the U.S.S.R. comes through two channels: technological devices and Soviet defectors. In the case of information about the KGB, the latter is virtually the only source. How could it be otherwise? In the most closed organization of a closed society, penetration by American agents is next to impossible; and this difficulty produces the reliance on defectors. But the Russians are well aware of this, and ever since the 1917 revolution they have attempted to plant ostensible defectors within Western intelligence structures in order to confuse and paralyze their enemies.

The Nosenko case was typical: The Americans badly needed information about Oswald's Soviet connection, but by its very nature this could only come from the Soviet side. The appearance of Nosenko was hence providential, but it had all the earmarks of a "plant." How can such information be checked? In the Nosenko case, the FBI believed it had a way, because a known KGB agent—code-named "Fedora"—had been passing information to Hoo-

ver's agents from his post within the Soviet delegation to the United Nations. And "Fedora" confirmed Nosenko's story, point by point. However, some of the information supplied by Nosenko and confirmed by "Fedora" turned out to be false, and this suggests that both Nosenko and "Fedora" were part of the Soviet disinformation network.

All of this would be sufficient to make the Epstein book significant, for rarely have we been given a view of the counterintelligence process so lucid and so serious. But there is still more, for Epstein strongly implies that the Russians may have planted one of their agents—a "mole"—in the American counterintelligence establishment that was evaluating Nosenko's information. An important Soviet defector told the CIA in the 1950s that such a plant had occurred, and the presence of a "mole" might explain how "Fedora" knew enough to be able to corroborate Nosenko's lies.

It is specially interesting, in light of this possibility, that several years after the Oswald incident, Nosenko was rehabilitated by the CIA, and his accusers were purged—part of the general rage which swept through Washington in the wake of the revelations leaked by the Pike and Church committees. Epstein's book is in one sense the first reply from those who were the victims of that period, and "Legend" will undoubtedly become part of the general debate over the CIA which is about to begin in Washington on the occasion of the proposed legislation dealing with the intelligence community.

Mr. Ledeen is executive editor of *The Washington Review of Strategic and International Studies*.

The Bookshelf

"Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald"

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